

MEDIA LEAKS A TWO-WAY STREET

The game of leaking information is a popular Washington pastime adroitly played by government and the press. So why all the uproar?

By William Giles

JUST before the Geneva summit conference last November, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger wrote a personal note to President Reagan. In it, he privately urged the President to avoid making any commitments to the Russians on two key arms control issues.

Two days later, the text of the letter—word-for-word, right down to the signature, “Cap”—mysteriously appeared in a New York newspaper.

Publication of the letter touched off a small tempest. A White House aide called it “sabotage.” Weinberger said he was “disturbed” and embarrassed. The Pentagon launched an investigation. There were hints of reprisals.

A dreaded “leak” had sprung again.

Curiously, Reagan seemed unperturbed even though it was his personal mail that had been publicized. Other high-ranking officials, unaccountably, seemed irritated with Weinberger. Columnists had fun with the White House, the Pentagon, the State Department and, as one writer put it, “the mole who came out of the hole.”

To most Americans, the incident must have been baffling. The bitter fights and repercussions over previous government leaks, the threats of lie-detector tests and phone taps to plug leaks, the somber concern of top officials about leaks—all contributed to a general sense that leaks were both despicable and dangerous.

To Washington veterans, however,

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the Weinberger episode merely reaffirmed the convivial conspiracy in the capital between press and government. This enduring relationship thrives on the informer’s need-to-tell and the reporter’s need-to-know. It produces what are negatively called “leaks” but more positively may be viewed as the public’s right to know.

The surreptitious passing of informa-



LEAK—Weinberger was unhappy, but the President didn't seem to mind.

tion to the press is not new, of course; every administration since George Washington’s has had to cope with the practice. And it’s not confined to Washington or politicians. Businessmen, lawyers, celebrities, scientists, sportsmen, editors—they all do it to curry favor, embarrass opponents or cover their rars. It is almost as American as Saturday morning TV cartoons—and often just as entertainingly trivial.

What set the Weinberger incident apart is that the leak obviously came from somebody high up—in an admin-

istration that has been especially tough on leakers. Weinberger himself came under suspicion because he had been excluded from the Geneva conference. Could it have been a member of his staff? A peer? A political foe? While this administration has done more than most to try to plug leaks and intimidate leakers, in this case it cleanly typified an ancient Washington maxim: Government is the only vessel that leaks from the top.

Leaking comes as naturally in the capital as daffodils in spring because all the players perceive it to be useful. In their view, it properly provides reporters with grist for exclusive stories while providing bureaucrats a fairly safe way to go public with information while remaining anonymous. High officials, who publicly condemn the practice, are not above privately leaking material to the press when it is to their advantage.

SPECIFIC examples have been documented in, among other places, the *Columbia Journalism Review*—leaks to marshal public support for the administration’s policy toward Libya’s Moammar Gadhafi and leaks to influence public attitudes toward Central America. Just before the recent election in the Philippines, the press bubbled with inspired stories from capital sources obviously designed to distance the administration from the unpopular regime of Ferdinand Marcos.

The journalistic competition for exclusivity in Washington, and elsewhere too, tends to balloon even trivial leaked items beyond their normal news value. Unlike common gossip, which also sells well, the voices from nowhere—“officials,” “authoritative sources,” “knowledgeable sources,” among others—can be disguised as legitimate news even when their information is thin and maybe even stale.

Leaking earned a bad name because it sometimes involves important matters impinging on national security, or what is contended to be national security. The press and its sources, for example, were harshly criticized for anonymous reports—some right, some wrong—out of the Vietnam war, the Watergate inquiry and the Pentagon papers. Some officials claim the feeling, particularly in the military, that the press couldn’t be trusted with anything secret was clearly reflected in the decision to bar newspeople from the Grenada invasion.

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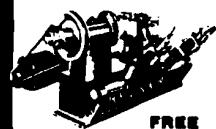
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Just last April, CIA Director William Casey lectured newspaper editors anew on both the need for and the dangers of anonymous sources.

Casey admitted that editors have shown restraint in publishing much information that he and other security people have considered sensitive. However, Howard Simon, curator of the Nieman Foundation, in rebuttal to Casey's general argument, pointedly noted that no American editor or reporter "has ever been prosecuted for espionage."

What often gets obscured in such arguments is that leaking is a two-way street. Officials routinely use leaks in one way or another to try to manage public attitudes and actions. In casual conversations, off-the-record talks, background briefings and other inventive ways, sources with special information diligently work overtime to "educate" both reporters and their audiences.

Only a small fraction of the information leaked ever sees the light of day: most reporters are bright enough to know when they're being "used," which is death for professional journalists. If they cannot confirm the substance of a leak in some fashion, it's usually filed and forgotten, along with the source.

Officials resort to leaks generally because they do not want to be identified with disclosure of information, sometimes because the "objectivity" of the press is thought to be more credible to the public than the authority of government. Reporters listen and pay heed to anonymous sources because they get instructive, newsy peeks behind the flat, uncommunicative face of bureaucracy. In this peculiar wedding of interests, the public often benefits because it, too, gets an inside look at the actual workings and attitudes of its government.

Leaks can be troublesome in a free society but the alternative is a closed society where there are no leaks and never a need for "plumbers." Could you imagine, for example, any American administration having the temerity the Soviets had when they announced the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, obviously without fear of complaint or contradiction?

Still, the truth leaked out, in waves of radioactivity. □